**Lofty Wisdom and Faithful Works**

**Text: James 3:13**

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We continue this week with our series on The Letter of James. Traditionally, this letter has been attributed to James, the brother of Jesus. But as far as we know, that James had little formal education and worked only with Jewish converts. The elegant Greek in which James is written and the creative synthesis of Greek and Jewish themes that it contains suggests a different author. Most likely it is written by a second or third generation Christian, perhaps in the latter part of the 1st century. And the Jewish-Greek synthesis that we see here is part of the creative genius of early Christianity. It offered the moral imperatives of Judaism, but in a cultural package that was accessible to Greek-speaking Gentile. That’s one reason why Christianity spread so quickly and transformed the world so profoundly.

But what we have here is more than a creative synthesis of elegant ideas. This letter contains very practical instructions about living in community. James says that if we’re going to live and work and serve together, we must start with wisdom born of God. From that wisdom flows faith. And faith is lived out through acts of caring toward those already in the community, and those who walk into the community, and – by implication – those in the wider community beyond the walls of the church.

So, yes: whatever else this letter may be about, it’s about acts of caring; it’s about deeds of love and mercy, offered to all, without prejudice or partiality. James is perhaps best known for that great line that we quoted several weeks ago: faith without works is dead (James 2:17).

 But at its heart, James is not really about doing all those good works. It’s about the wisdom and the humility which *give birth* to such good works; the wisdom and humility which *usher forth* in deeds of love and mercy; deeds which are expressed in a spirit of gentleness.

Which brings us to today’s text: James 3:13. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

Last week I made a passing reference to a line from an old Peanuts comic strip. That’s where I’d like to start this week. Lucy is complaining, as usual, and she says, “Those of you who think you know it all are bothering those of us who really do!”

Lucy thinks she is a person of great wisdom. She offers psychiatric help; for a fee, of course. She tries to order around her little brother, and Charlie Brown, and anyone else within shouting distance. She thinks that if everyone would just listen to *her*, the world would be a much better place.

Perhaps there were some folks like Lucy in the church to which the Letter of James is addressed. “Who is wise and understanding among you?” James asks. Apparently there were some folks who *thought* they were. And I’m guessing that, like Lucy, they let everyone know it. One of the great ironies in life is the contrast between the loud and outspoken people who *think* they’re wise, and the quiet and gentle people who really are. Charles Schultz captures this so well in the contrast between Lucy and Linus: she of the great bombast, and he of the gentle wisdom.

So yes; maybe there were some Lucys trying to run things in that early community of faith to which James wrote. Perhaps that’s why James wrote this line: “Show by your good life that your works are done with *gentleness* born of wisdom.” And he goes on to note how gentleness reflects *true* wisdom. Consider verse 17: “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

Who is wise and understanding among you? James suggests that it’s often the quiet and gentle one.

I read somewhere that Charles Schultz based Lucy on his first wife. And he wasn’t shy about telling people that. Which may explain why that first marriage didn’t last.

So, true wisdom first of all is *gentle*. It gives voice to God’s gentleness, as God whispers to each of us that we need to quiet down a little bit, and listen, and get along.

Secondly, true wisdom is reflected in *humility*. It is “willing to yield,” James says. The author contrast such wise humility with a “selfish ambition” that is “boastful and false to the truth” (see James 3:14-17). The one who is ambitious and less than wise is likely to scream bloody murder until he or she gets his or her own way. The one who is wise willingly yields his or her own ideas and ambition, if doing so will serve the common good.

Several times in recent weeks the image of the flexible tree has been used within our community of faith. I think it illustrates the point. The tree that bends with the wind remains standing through stormy gales and tough times. The tree that is rigid and never bends gets snapped off when the storms come. That’s a powerful image. It so beautifully illustrates the willingness to yield that James is talking about. And it sure helps folks to live together as families, as neighbors, as a community of faith. When self-righteous rigidity takes the place of humble flexibility, bad things can happen.

For example…one day many years ago – when I was young and dumb – I was driving down a nice, rural, two lane highway. There’s a red light ahead, I ease up to the stop light, and pretty soon a car pulls up beside me. But it’s only a 2 lane road, and that lane on my right is a right turn lane. But that’s the lane this guy has pulled into, obviously intent on passing me. Now, I’ve been going the speed limit. Truth be told, I’ve been going 5-10 mph over the speed limit. So I’m thinking (in my self-righteous way), “Who does this guy think he is, trying to pass me; and in a lane that isn’t a passing lane?!” What this guy doesn’t know is that I use to drive a taxicab in Chicago. What this guy doesn’t know is that my little Toyota has more pick-up than one might think. So I’m thinking, “I’m going to beat this sucker off the line.” The light turns green, and I’m off! Unfortunately, so is he. Now we’re neck and neck, and the little lane is about to end. “Houston, we have a problem!” At the last second I back off the accelerator, and he leaves me in his dust.

When self-righteous rigidity takes the place of humble flexibility, bad things can happen. The wise person is gentle, and willing to yield. Such gentle flexibility makes possible peace within the family, within the nation, within the church.

By the way, be aware of the middle age man who claims that he *never* did anything reckless and stupid in his youth. I can tell you from my own experience that it probably ain’t so.

True wisdom is gentle. True wisdom is flexible. And true wisdom is lived out in *community*. Indeed, it gives *birth* to community, and *nurtures* community. And peace and gentleness within the community; mutual respect and care for others within the community: these are the good works that James is trying to encourage here. Faith *without these good works in particular* is dead.

We all live in communities. Your family is a community. Bedford is a community. Our nation is a community. This congregation is a community. All such communities are harmed when people insist on having things their own way. The fabric of community is torn apart when people are so passionate about their own agendas that they plow ahead, without consulting, without listening, either shouting down or charming away the opposition and acting as if nothing else matters besides the thing that I’m passionate about.

My model for living in community is my dad. And Dad would frequently say, “Let’s consult.” In fact, what he often said was, “Let’s consult with your mother.” My dad was a wise man. So we had family conferences. Major decisions were made that way. And at dinner each night we talked about what was going on in each other’s lives. Kind of like how we go around the table at Church Board meetings, or church planning sessions, and share what’s happening in our various ministries. And on our good days we listen and we bend and we do what we can to accommodate each other and serve the common good.

True wisdom is gentle, it’s flexible, it’s lived out in community, and it comes from God. Which means that without prayer – without actually talking with God; without consulting with God – we’re not likely to access that wisdom. “Let’s consult,” my dad use to say, and when he did so he meant especially that we should consult with each other, but perhaps first of all we need to be consulting collectively with God. Especially as we finish crafting our Future Story and begin to *move* into that future that God has prepared for us. So, as we move forward as a community through these final months of dreaming and preparing – looking toward having that Future Story before us no later than December – here’s how I think we can be wise together:

First, I’ve asked our Prayer Team – our stout group of 8 prayer warriors – to ask God for clarity as to how we ought to proceed, where we need to go, in what direction does the future lie. I mean, we’ve got a gazillion good ideas – the August Planning Retreat where our congregational leaders got together certainly produced a wealth of good and faithful ideas – and the direction is coming into focus, but we still have a ways to go. Now some churches might get into a knock-down, drag-out battle at this point – some churches might engage in conflicts and disputes, to use James’ words – but that’s because they don’t first stop to ask God for directions. “You do not have because you do not ask,” James says. Prayer is about asking. Among other things, prayer is about asking God for directions. So the Prayer Team will be asking God for directions as we move into this crucial stage of crafting our Future Story.

While the Prayer Team is asking God for directions, the Future Story Writing Team has been crafting multiple drafts of our Future Story, and just this morning they asked each other, “What is it the WHY of our ministry? Why does Bedford-First Christian Church exist? Why has God placed us here, on this corner, at just this point in time? And what they discerned is this: *Bedford-First Christian Church exists to reach outward in order to connect people with abundance*. That answer to the WHY will be our filter for further distilling our Future Story and going forward.

The Prayer Team will be consulting with God, the Writing Team will be consulting with each other, and we all need to consult with ourselves. Especially those of us who are particularly passionate about going in a certain direction; we need to consult…with ourselves. We need to ask ourselves if the thing that I’d like us to do is really of the Spirit. We need to ask ourselves if this thing that I’m passionate about will serve God’s Kingdom. “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God,” the scripture says, “and all these things will be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). So, we need to ask if it’s just my passion, or if it reflects a passion for God’s Kingdom.

We need to ask that about the things that excite us, and we need to ask that about the things that excite someone else, that they want me to help them with. In the past, in other churches, I’ve encouraged people to name their passion, recruit others who share that passion, and go for it. That’s a fine model for ministry…so long as you have a big pool of volunteers. But we don’t have such a big pool. And if we each try to ram ahead with our own passion, we’re going to be competing with each other for the same volunteers, and pretty soon we’re all going to be exhausted. And maybe we’re already exhausted. After all, a lot of hard work has been done just to rescue this wonderful congregation from the edge of the cliff that you were standing on a few years ago. So if you’re really passionate about something, I urge you to prayerfully consider whether it’s *your* passion, or the *Spirit’s* passion. Does it reflect God’s will for the common good, or is it leaning in the direction of your self-interest? Ask God about that. Pray about that. And listen for God to answer, in the wisdom that comes from above; sometimes in gentle whispers.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” I use to get all self-righteous about what I perceived to be my good works. I use to use the Letter of James to bolster that self-righteousness. “Faith without works is dead,” I proclaimed to other Christians who weren’t working hard enough to suit me. I think maybe I was missing the point. Faith without works is dead, yes; but works that are bolstered by self-righteousness are not the kind of faithful works that James is advocating. James is calling the body of Christ to be engaged together in gentle works, born of wisdom. Amen.